
The babus and the festivals of colonial Calcutta through the eyes of an observant owl Shamik Basu

Link : https://santiniketansahityapath.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/13_Shamik-Basu.pdf

Abstract: Calcutta, in early colonial period, experienced an interesting time, marked by emergence of a new elite class, migration, reformation, changing economy and many more. Kaliprasanna Singha, in his *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*, expressed different facets of the society of Calcutta in 19th century. Every character in his vignettes represented different classes of society. With the acknowledgement of his daring portrayal of different truths of society by historians and ethnographers, he was attacked by critics too.

Key words: *Hutom*, babu, festival, British.

Introduction

Kaliprasanna Singha's *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*, written in the 1860s, is one of the earliest social satires of colonial Calcutta. Addressing himself as *Hutom pyancha*, through a series of lively sketches narrated by him from above, Kaliprasanna tried to expose the contradictions and hypocrisies of a society caught between tradition and modernity. This book is translated by Swarup Roy in English into *The Observant Owl: Hutom's Vignettes of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta*.

Colonial Calcutta, very recently shaped by the coming of the British, emergence of capitalism and urban expansion, became a theatre where old orders and new trends clashed. The babu was the main character of this society, both in this time and in this book. The babu appears in every corner of every chapter of this book – the city's festivals, gossip, and rituals. The most important character in this book is indeed the city of Calcutta itself. There is no character in the history of performing arts and literature which is as varied as the character of Calcutta in this book. *Hutom*, with his extraordinary wit, exposes the patriarchy beneath the shawl of reform: confinement, objectification, exploitation and silencing of women. Written in colloquial Bengali, which was an uncommon practice in 19th century, the book, with its memorable sarcasms, captures the sounds and speech of a living city.

Kaliprasanna Singha, a pioneer colloquial satirist

The author of the revolutionary *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*, Kaliprasanna Singha or the *Hutom Pyancha* himself, was born into the renowned Singha family of Jorasanko in North Calcutta. Although his date of birth is a debatable issue, according to the publication in Calcutta Courier on 24 February 1840, celebrations had taken place in the Singha family on 23 February 1840 for the birth of the son of Nandalal Singha.

Kaliprasanna Singha was certainly a man of brilliance and versatility. He is known primarily for two things – translating the epic 'Mahabharata,' which is the magnum opus of his literary life according to many and authoring *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha* which came to be a pioneer work of its kind and eventually a topic of debate and controversy. He was

The babus and the festivals of colonial Calcutta

admitted to Hindu College, where his grandfather Jay Krishna Singha was a Director. Although he left the college in 1857, his knowledge in Bengali, English and Sanskrit was exceptional. After his father's death, Harachandra Ghosh, a judge of lower court, took his guardianship. Kaliprasanna founded the Vidyotsahini Sabha, or the Society for the Cultivation of Knowledge, at the age of fifteen. The primary subjects of discussion among its members centered on social reform and progressive thought. People like Peary Chand Mitra, Acharya Krishna Kamal Bhattacharya and Krishnadas Pal were important members associated with the Sabha. He also established Vidyotsahini Mancha in 1857 at his home. Being a versatile actor himself, he could play both the roles of male and female with ease. Kaliprasanna was a philanthropist and a supporter of reforms by heart. From financially aiding many newspapers and journals like Hindoo Patriot to distributing his translation of 'Mahabharata' free of cost. An award of one thousand rupees was announced by him to any man who married a widow, as he was a supporter of the cause of widow remarriage. Reverend James Long was fined heavily for his involvement in the translation of Neel Darpan, written by Dinabandhu Mitra and the fine was paid by Kaliprasanna himself.

His impact in literature is also stupendous. He wrote in and edited several important magazines like Vidyotsahini Patrika, Sarvatattwa Prakashika and Bibidhartha Samgraha and finally wrote *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha* in 1861, in which he dived into the tensions that emerged in the contemporary Bengali society in a satirical way. He documented the changing social order of Calcutta – how aristocratic families were getting out of scenario and a new class of elites were emerging, who were educated in western education and embraced Brahmoism and other European traditions. Additionally, gossips and rumours reflected different voices of the city and the simultaneous existence of the newly – emerged modernity with the little traces of the past.

His presentation of the contradiction between the everyday life and the portrayal of natives in newspapers like Hindoo Patriot and The Friend of India is noticeable. In his sketches, amidst festivals, gossips and performances, he presented a world that was rich and noisy. By including festivals, elite gatherings, street performance and the existence of common people, he wanted to let us know of the existence of both the worlds in the cosmopolitan city of Calcutta. According to Priyanka Basu, the word 'naksha' which alternately means embroidery, portrays this binding together of the simultaneous lives and reveals the cosmopolitan nature of the city.

Through his sketches, Kaliprasanna clearly conveyed his criticism of the suppression of local cultural traditions under colonial laws that deemed them obscene by Victorian standards of morality. An instance of this is the stopping of the Kacharipara shawng by Sir Stuart Hogg, chairman of Calcutta Corporation.

Kaliprasanna was appointed as an honorary magistrate and Justice of the Peace in 186 and also served as the Chief Presidency Magistrate of Calcutta for a period. He was further elected as a Municipal Commissioner of the city. However, despite his prestigious positions, Kaliprasanna fell into significant financial trouble towards the end of his life, as he lacked control over his spending and continued to make generous donations without restraint.

In his final years, Kaliprasanna developed a heavy drinking problem, which

eventually took a toll on his health. He passed away on July 24, 1870, at the age of 29, from liver disease, leaving behind a lasting legacy. His lavish lifestyle, largely devoted to charitable causes, eventually drained his finances. For instance, his distribution of numerous copies of the Mahabharata alone cost him an astounding two and a half lakh rupees, a huge sum for that time.

The babus and the festivals of colonial Calcutta through the eyes of an observant owl

Historical Background

When the British East India Company (EIC) gained possession of the three villages Kolikata, Sutanuti and Gobindapur, Calcutta began to experience its transformation. This was followed by the construction of forts and warehouses by the British to solidify their power. After the decline of the Mughal Empire and gaining of the Diwani rights in 1765, the British expanded its land acquisition and further cemented its commercial interests. This fueled the trade of British exports from Bengal, including cloth, sugar, saltpeter and spices.

Intermediaries and the new elite:

Since the onset of Colonialism, the British always found India to be a strange land. For a good governance, it was important to know the land and its different aspects. Here lied the importance of interpreters and intermediaries. They helped the British in administrative work. Although the original merchant families like that of the Basaks and the Seths already existed, some migrated to Calcutta to make fortunes as brokers. By the later half of 18th century, banyans and dewans became the topmost layer of native economic communities, giving shape to the new elite class of Calcutta, which comprised mainly fortune-makers.

This rise was followed by a new trend in the newly-emerging rich Bengali class i.e. their withdrawal of investment from business and eventual investment in urban and rural real estate. The banyans of the early 18th century left behind large estates with steady income for their descendants. Unfortunately, the descendants finished all their inherited wealth within two generations because of their indulgence in wine, women and other pleasures.

Bhadralok, Poverty and the Urban life:

The introduction of Permanent Settlement in 1793, which involved revenue payment in cash, doomed the Bengal countryside with famine and subsequent poverty. Without any other choice, the poor farmers went for urban jobs. Even there were instances of people selling their children for money. With the expansion of urbanization in the latter half of 18th century, the ousted rural poor largely settled in North Calcutta, or the Black Town. The rich aristocratic people formed the other half of Calcutta, who maintained their traditional and proud habits like smoking and visiting Kalighat temple. Another regular habit of the elites was visiting their courtesans. The courtesan-visiting culture expanded by the middle of the 19th century.

Following the abolition of the EIC's monopoly by the Charter Act of 1813, the local banyans found opportunities to profit by collaborating with British adventurers and trading houses. This accumulation of wealth spurred changes in the patterns of consumption of the propertied class, resulting in the subsequent increasing imports of luxury products.

In the 19th century, the British officials wanted to educate certain Bengalees to assist in administration, which led to the establishment of institutions like Fort William College. Submitting to the Orientalist view, the Bengal upper and middle classes recognized the British as the new rulers of India and showed their interest to learn English. So, they, along with the British officials, jointly founded educational institutions like the Hindu College and Bethune School.

The Permanent Settlement gave impetus to the existing tendency among the aristocrats to withdraw investments from business and put their investments in land. The zamindars who failed to pay their revenue were forced to auction their estates, which the new banyans and dewans purchased. They, known as absentee zamindars, enjoyed their urban life in Calcutta and collected their rents with the help of an extensive network of agents.

By the early 19th century, a new ruling elite of the Black Town emerged, whose influence was largely confined to the administration of the government. They were known as the bhadralok, who were educated and achieved social mobility. This group included junior clerks and middle-class individuals who wanted to be a part of the respected circle of Calcutta, by distancing themselves from their rural roots and imitating the actual elite bhadralok.

The literary personalities of 19th century such as Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay and Kaliprasanna Singha brought the emergence of these elites in the literature. Kaliprasanna specially wrote about their ill-associations, the courtesan culture and their lavish lifestyles. He also addressed the contemporary issues like corruption in the British East India Company, the hanging of Maharaja Nandakumar, the rigid caste system, community pujas and major political issues like the Revolt of 1857.

Aspects of Colonial Calcutta through *Hutom's* vignettes

The Babus and Festivals of Calcutta:

In the middle of the British attempts to discipline the Indians, festivals and cultural traditions were the perfect way out of these unwanted impositions. Although the whites never forgot to remind the people of their existences through sounds like gunshots at Fort William, the people neither forgot to live their life.

In the first chapter, the author set up the environment to let the readers understand that it was the time of Charak festival which actually means the end of Bengali new year, through reverberations of drums in the city. The acts of hook-swinging, which was an activity of self-torture but seemingly necessary for religion, has a mention in the book, along other arrangements. Low-caste folks, including people of grog shops and brothels, were seen dancing. With performing the religious activities, the sannyasis, wearing their spooky outfits, danced and begged for alms. The festival ground was full of contradictions: on one hand, people were enjoying the festival and on the other hand, activities of corruption were going on simultaneously. The corrupted brokers hunted for their prey, found wealthy men like Padmalochan Babu and looted them. Here, the author wanted to tell the readers that this situation was limited to his fiction, but was inspired from real-life incidents. The Charak ground was a blend of religiosity and vulgarity, with the smell of liquor and burning resin polluting the environment.

There were noticeable differences between the Charak celebrations of traditional Hindus and those of the reformed classes in this book. The English-educated and reformed Bengali bhadralok were divided into two groups: one that mimicked English customs, such as smoking cigars and discussing politics and a second group including people like Bagambar Mitra — who were ruined by drinking and perpetually under the weather. Both the Brahmins and the Brahmo Samaj, a reformist organization, opposed the Charak festival. This portrayal of the Charak festival by Kaliprasanna represents the braided nature of Calcutta, which reflects the coexistence of people from all social strata, their contradictory opinions and the resulting debates.

Hutom's portrayal of the celebration of Snanyatra also represents a cosmopolitan nature of the people of Calcutta to some extent. He said that in the past, this festival was celebrated in a grand manner. However, some zamindars of Dhaka and Babus in their youth, carpenters, blacksmiths, spice traders and bell metal workers kept this tradition alive. Therefore, the majority of the consumers of this festival were workmen. The description of the celebration of a character, Gurudas Guin and his friends imply that despite not being rich, they never forgot to enjoy every opportunity unlike the riches who were busy thinking about life and afterlife. Kaliprasanna, being an active advocate of reforms himself, expressed his support for Vidyasagar and his mission of widow remarriage by referring a few times a dhoti made in Santipur, where it is written 'long live Vidyasagar' (Singha 2024, p.177). With the rich and fun-loving Babus, there is also a mention of a modest Babu on his way to Mahesh with his nephew and younger brother. However, no celebration was complete for men of 19th century without the company of women. Being embarrassed by the ridiculing of the fellow journeymen towards Mahesh, Gurudas and his friends went out to find a woman. After failing in this attempt, Gurudas brought his widowed aunt. The pilgrims of varied nature completed their journey to Mahesh through Cossipore Ghat, addressed at Ratan Babu's ghat by the author. The commoners threw stones towards the babus, which expresses an actual and obvious disgust of the people towards the elites. Assessing the lifestyle and activities of the sons of the rich, the author calls them the copies of "dhobi's donkeys" (Ibid, p.186). A beautiful scenery of a mela was portrayed, having a melodious and happy nature. The level of arrogance of the babus was incomparable as even the almighty had to wait for them for the ritual bathing. Lastly, Gurudas and his friends were not mentioned till the end because they were lost. This is a classic example of *Hutom's* wit which brings a smile to every reader even after nearly 170 years of publication.

After Snanyatra, *Hutom* moved on to the festival of Rathyatra. The author said that the scope of celebrating in Rathyatra was very less, but Bengalis always had the unique talent of not letting go any of the *tero parbon* of *baro mash*. A typical scenery of Bengali *Rather mela* was depicted here – people standing by the road to see the chariot, women walking by the road wearing their new sarees and blooming fortunes of the festive markets. Presence of female Vaishnava kirtan singers, amateurs and their prompters perfectly portray the actual scene of 19th century *Rather Mela* of Calcutta. The nature of the festival has not so much changed till now.

Durga Puja might be the most important part of a Bengali calendar, but when the *Naksha* was being written, nobody in the north-western provinces knew about Durga Puja

before it was made famous by Raja Krishnachandra Roy of Nadia. Only elite families would celebrate Durga Puja. After its introduction, people of every social stratum participated in this grand festival. Hutom says that Durga Puja even opened the fortune of businesses which were stagnant for the rest of the year. The increase of crimes in the city is another side of the festival. According to the author, it is a feast for pickpockets and thieves, sometimes even involving people from the police. The author mentions a babu sitting with his diwan and chief pundit on either side, a character probably inspired by Khelat Chandra Ghosh, grandson of Ramlochan Ghosh, who was a clerk to Warren Hastings. The conflicts between the elite groups of the time were intense and had a significant impact on society. Hutom described a scene where the names of those who sought help from their rivals — especially the Pirali Brahmins and those who supported widow remarriage — were often blacklisted. This is how the rivalry is depicted in the book. It is thus observed that a common feature of the contemporary elite babus was their disapproval of widow remarriage. Hutom also talked about Calcutta's community pujas. In 19th-century Calcutta, barwari or community pujas were public festivals funded through subscriptions collected by fund-raisers known as divans or huzoors, often depicted as corrupt and extortionate in Hutom Pyanchar Naksha. In the book, Birkrishna Babu managed grand households, while Kanaidhan Babu exploited both rich and poor to extract donations. Bikrishna represents the elite and Kanaidhan represents intermediaries of Calcutta's society. The pujas combined religious devotion with entertainment, which included competitive musical troupes, satirical songs, and performances by baijis, often descending into vulgarity and drunken revelry. Hutom highlights the moral and financial consequences of excessive indulgence, portraying the community puja as a stage for both social spectacle and ethical critique.

Hutom did not even spare the Young Bengals. He satirically told that their ritualistic worship of Durga Puja included food and drinks with their friends as if those were prasads. Their puja was of different sorts – cash offerings went to the host's account instead of priest, visiting the idol with shoes and allowances of candles made of animal fat were unique aspects. Durga Ma also went through Westernization according to the author, with a bonnet instead of gown and sandwich was an offering to her and navapatrika was bathed in hot kettle water instead of Ganga water, which was later used to prepare coffee for breakfast (Ibid, p.199). This is also an example of a classic satire of Kaliprasanna. His observation, assessment and humour would not let any reader close the book out of monotony.

On the day of Saptami, Hutom remarks that it was the time for the Babus to display their grandeur. It did not matter whether the Goddess accepted their offerings, as long as people recognized their splendour. The Durga Puja celebrations in Calcutta had a unique feature: the hosts and the invited guests rarely met. If they happened to cross paths by chance, they merely exchanged a nod. At times, the host was even absent altogether, probably occupied with whatever pleased him. In the chapter of Durga Puja, the host was said to be participating in all kinds of activities and dances – so much so that, interestingly, even Durga Ma was getting scared. The author, being an excellent observer from the sky, presented the Puja from the eyes of the commoners also. Streets were flooded with them. The brahmins collecting money, shoe thieves and the unsolicited behaviour of the Babu's nephews gave shape to an impressive sketching of a scenery of Durga Puja by Kaliprasanna

Singha. Navami was shown in a melancholic way. Excitements were over, which is a scenario till now and would positively continue as long as Durga Puja continues. The book mentioned drunk Babus and his friend singing songs and smearing each other's body with sacrificial blood, which is described in Mahendranath Dutta's *Kolikatar Puraton Kahini o Pratha* (Ibid, p. 205). Babus, with their company, sons and grandsons sang kada-matir gaan which was very obscene and indecent according to Sumanta Banerjee, in *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta*. On Dashami, the environment became melancholy in the Naksha. The typical denial of a Bengali to participate in bishorjon or the immersing of the idol of Durga Ma in Ganga, even when fully aware of it, is clearly depicted here. At last, the author shares a song which depicted the reality of the 19th century Calcutta –

“Leave the city, O Mother dear
Don't ever again come back here.
The woes of Calcutta grow day by day,
so it's better Ma that you keep away.” (Ibid, p.208)

The city was facing so much degradation that the author, in an unfortunate but compelling manner, asks Ma Durga to stay away from Calcutta. This was true as Calcutta, in 19th century, was facing many problems which were degrading the society – conflicts in banning of social evils like Sati, new taxes which increased the financial burden of the common people, forcefully imposed colonial laws and harsh punishments for not following them, torture by the elite, discrimination in every way possible, treachery, charlatanry and many more. He told that the same people who once have built the wrestling arenas, created good music and literature, have downgraded to such extent that they were now pleasuring themselves with cheap songs and Baijee nautches (Ibid, p. 211). Kaliprasanna might have sketched the festivals as their way out of the bad times, but the society was corrupted from its roots.

About Ramlila, the author said that it was not a festival of Bengal and was celebrated by sepoys of Barrackpore. Babus and their courtesans, Marwaris and traders formed the consumer base of the festival. Bhabani Babu, representing any other elite babu of the contemporary Calcutta and their toadies, after getting ready, went for the festival. The babu receiving compliment of every kind in every step is a regularly recurring instance of this book, reflecting the tactic of the toadies to get what they wanted. They probably appreciated even when the author said that Bhabani Babu was looking like a “dog's dinner” (Ibid, p. 214). However, the babus were not so much aware of their underlying tactic behind every praise. It is interesting to see that the servants were using the babu's products only after when he left, perhaps representing the notion that they were forbidden to touch any of the babu's things because of class discrimination. Despite class differences, both the rich and the poor liked to spend a huge sum on rituals, one spent as much they wanted and one had to depend on alms. Hutom had a particular disgust for the sons of the babus. In the book, he wrote that Ramlila could not take place in Raja Baidyanath Bahadur's Garden because of his sons. The festival was held in the flower garden of Raja Narasingha Bahadur, which was also ruined by his son, whose sole aim was to make money from the festival. That year, ticket system was introduced in the festival, which was very obvious because of the intention of the babu's son. However, as it was said earlier, people of Calcutta would not let go of any parban. Babus, their courtesan company and some good-for-nothing school-going boys who sold their textbooks to smoke and

have paans were the characters of this festival. The babus somehow liked the ticket system, perhaps because it reinforced the social discriminations they had created and prevented the poor from attending.

Along with the festivals of the city, the sketch of the so-called main highlight of Calcutta along with its festivals, i.e, the babus, was very important. Mainly presented as obese people who were married but didn't like the company of their wives very much. Rather, they had courtesans and mistresses for whom they lavishly spent heavy amounts. However, the love for courtesans was not limited to the babus; men from all social strata were drawn to them. A notable example is of Gurudas Guin, who missed the once-a-year holy Snanyatra at Mahesh because he was on a quest to find a woman for entertainment. The babus represented the new elite community of the society who owed their full credit to the Permanent Settlement of 1793 for their emergence. Some of them were self-proclaimed representatives of imported western styles and trends, but others were like Padmalochan Babu who was a representative of orthodox Hinduism. These religious fanatics also were interesting as they pretended to be the purest followers of Hinduism but did all the impure activities as soon as the sun went down. Instead of mobilising the development of the society and the progress of the country, they created hurdles for the social reformers in every step. Their toadies were the catalyst in every misdeed of theirs. Only to get what they wanted, they supported the wealthy babus in every activity without judging the consequences and glorified the babus as if they were godmen. The railway stationmasters and clerks babus also had a rude nature. There was only one mention of a modest babu who was on his way to Mahesh. By this, the author implied that there were still some good babus left who actually helped the society to get rid of social evils and progress towards betterment.

Religious credulity:

The most striking aspect of India throughout her history is religion. Numerous instances show that religion can create, mobilize and even destroy movements. It is somehow the apex of sensitivity of the majority in the subcontinent and charlatanry was an important aspect of the religious exploitation in 19th century Calcutta. From real life incidents like the Tarakeshwar Murder Case of 1873 to Satyajit Ray's portrayal of "Birinchibaba" in his movie Mahapurush, it can be observed that Calcutta was indeed "a city where strange things and creatures are never in short supply" (Ibid, p. 135).

Hutom shares an instance of a peculiar character called Haribhadra Kaka, who came from the so-called socially respected caste of Kayastha. He believed in a sannyasi who could turn ordinary things in gold and who had the talent of reading minds of the people. There were many religious frauds who mercilessly fooled people and robbed them in every way possible. The "Seven-limbed Cow" in the chapter 'Gossips and Rumours' is a satire of this community of godmen who fooled people for living (Ibid, p. 112). However, *Hutom* did not fully blame the people as they were not that educated to judge what was rationally possible and what was not. Most importantly, the existence of a superior human and their guidance were a big psychological support for the poor and lowest rungs of the society. This became the base of the charlatan business. However, it is also clearly mentioned by Hutom that it is the people who caught and taught the frauds their well-deserved lessons.

Another character of Hossain Khan, who also was a proud representative of the charlatan community, was introduced. After seeing his tricks and performances, the atheists also started believing in Khan. Interestingly, the audience of Khan and the 'Seven-Limbed Cow' share the same traits (Ibid, p. 112). He was eventually caught and ended up in jail, referred to by the author as "government rest house" (Ibid, p. 137). The author shared a truly innovative fraud as well, where he talked about a sorcerer who was called at a goldsmith's residence to cure a sick family member. Glory to the advancement of science! Amidst the rigidity of the babus, the students of Calcutta Medical College exposed the sorcerer using scientific methods. The author was silently documenting all of this, sitting scared in the room and wearing numerous amulets.

Brahminical dominance is portrayed many times in this book. Padmalochan Dutta for instance, had the appearance of a rigid Hindu babu. He licked dust off Brahmin feet and was engaged in factionalism. The author, by his incomparable wit, compared Padmalochan's gathering of Brahmins with the live creatures of the Asiatic Society Museum (Ibid, p. 155). After gaining fortune in such a short time, he started to believe that he was the incarnation of a divine being. His critics called him "Sudden Avatar" (Ibid, p. 156). To enforce his pseudo-superiority, he spread many gossips about himself that he did some otherworldly wonders.

The Orientalist project of the British might have been based on Enlightenment principles, but the subjects of the project proved to be highly non-enlightened. The principle of dogmatism-over-rationalism reigned here. Maybe that was why the meat of the sacrificial goat was distributed among the babu's followers after seven long days. The author however left the responsibility to us, the readers, to judge how much palatable the meat would be. Padmalochan thought that English education and Brahmoism polluted the Hindu religion and he needed to rescue it to its purity. It is unfortunate that they did nothing for the progress of the country. The people who were against their principles were atheist and Christian to them. His hate for Vidyasagar was expressed by his negative stand for English language and widow remarriage. His hate for western medicine eventually led to his painful death, which he might have avoided if he was not so rigid. The point *Hutom* wanted to make here was that this character of Padmalochan was not uncommon, people like these could be spotted in everywhere in the city in 19th century Calcutta.

Ascetics were supposed to leave all kinds of worldly fascinations. Thus, the big question remains that how people like Premananda Baba were described by the author as wealthy? Premananda Baba and his friend Gyanananda Baba were the sketches of satire of Tekchand Thakur and his friend Shibchandra Deb respectively. These characters were inspired by the characters in the novel *Jatkinchit*, written by Tekchand Thakur or Pyarichand Mitra himself (Ibid, p. 222). It is also interesting to note that Gyanananda Baba was informed by a woman of the departure of Premananda Baba in his journey. After suffering from the annoyance of a brahmo babu who came to Calcutta, they reached the new railway station. The attitude of the first-class ticket-giving differed from that of the third-class. The clerks in the department of third-class were presented as rude and drowned in corruption and protest of any sort would result in kicking out. The experience in the third-class train could be understood from its comparison by the author to the experience of the East India company officials in the Black hole tragedy (Ibid, p.236).

Patriarchy:

The babu's world, as presented in *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*, is mainly masculine, dominated by clerks, priests, drunkards, and flatterers. Women were largely absent from the public sphere, except appearing as wives, widows, mistress and courtesans. The same babu who organized respectable community pujas visited courtesans by night and proudly declare themselves the purest Hindus in the whole world. *Hutom* might have sarcastically presented these juxtaposed contradictions from above, but it revealed the true patriarchal nature of 19th century Calcutta. Kaliprasanna himself at times, participated in patriarchy: he said that the women who were persuaded by the babus would bring disgrace to the family.

The image of a courtesan particularly reveals the patriarchal nature of the then society. The babu's obsession with her performances and other perks betrays his want of social respect. The women servicemen were presented in a such a manner that they would only survive by catering to male needs. Kaliprasanna also expressed women's limitations within the domestic sphere. Wives, in his sketches, never spoke, they only did what was ordered and remained silent in every exploitation and suffering. They were victims of constant surveillance, hierarchical discrimination and immorality. In the colonial city of Calcutta, men claimed to be progressive and Europeanized, yet their masculinity flourished on the suppression of women in every sphere.

Conclusion:

In the discourse of Colonial Calcutta, Kaliprasanna Singha's *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha* has made its place through the years. Partha Chatterjee has even privileged this text as an ethnographic source because of the varied nature, class and aspects of every character. Rise of the new Bengali elite, urban growth and other contemporary social changes were vividly produced in this book.

Sumanta Banerjee, in his book *The Parlour and the Streets*, acknowledged Kaliprasanna's daring move through *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*, of bringing a fresh approach in the literary world of Calcutta. He, along with his contemporary Peary Chand Mitra aka. Tekchand Thakur, brought colloquial Bengali to literature when Sanskritized Bengali dominated it. This shift paved the way for the author to present the social realities of the period. Pradip Sinha, in *Calcutta in Urban History* said the *Hutom's* vignettes represented the transformation of Calcutta which was mobilised by Colonialism and rise of the elites. Various pleasures of the babus, moral or immoral, were portrayed in this book, as was the growing economic and moral distance between the opulent babus and the common masses. Anindita Ghosh, referring to the Calcutta as a theatre of contradictions, said that this work presented the effects of the colonial rule. Thus, this work, being both an outstanding piece of literature in the 18th century and an ethnographic source of the contemporary elite-dominated Calcutta, quenches the thirst of both a litterateur and a historian. Although it attracted a lot of criticisms, about which the author already predicted in his introduction, this work stands as a revolutionary work which dared to display the bitter truth of the conservative society and the sufferings of women and the destitute.

References:

1. Banerjee, Arka Deb, "Review of History of Popular Calcutta, by Anindita Ghosh", published in the journal 'Economic and Political Weekly', vol. 52, no. 38, 2017, pp. 40–42, ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846, Link: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26697751>
2. Banerjee, Sumanta, 'The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta', Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989
3. Banerjee, Sumanta, "Bogey of the Bawdy: Changing Concept of 'Obscenity' in 19th Century Bengali Culture", published in the journal 'Economic and Political Weekly', vol. 22, no. 29, 1987, pp. 1197–1206, ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846, Link: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4377248>
4. Banerjee, Sumanta, "The 'Beshya' and the 'Babu': Prostitute and Her Clientele in 19th Century Bengal", published in the journal 'Economic and Political Weekly', vol. 28, no. 45, 1993, pp. 2461–2472, ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846, Link: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400383>
5. Basu, Priyanka, "The Observant Owl: Sensory Worlds of Colonial Calcutta in Hutom's Vignettes", published in the journal 'South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies', 2021. DOI:10.1080/00856401.2021.1966170, Link: https://www.academia.edu/51146622/The_Observant_Owl_Sensory_Worlds_of_Colonial_Calcutta_in_Hutoms_Vignettes
6. Bhattacharya, Dipankar, "Lakh Taka Kharach Korey Rakshitar Beraler Biye", 2021, Link: <https://www.anandabazar.com/rabibashoriyo/babu-culture-and-its-effects-on-literature/cid/1268678>
7. Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 'Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference', Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 189–201
8. Chaudhuri, Rosinka, 'The Literary Thing: History, Poetry and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere', New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 61
9. Ghosh, Anindita, 'Claiming the City: Protest, Crime, and Scandals in Colonial Calcutta, c. 1860–1920', New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016
10. Guha, Ranajit, "A Colonial City and Its Time (s)", in the book 'The Observant Owl: Hutom's Vignettes of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta', by Kaliprasanna Singha, translated by Swarup Roy, Delhi: Primus Books, 2024
11. Lahiri Gerold, Oeendril, "The Observant Owl or Hutum Panchar Naksha", 2008, Link: https://www.academia.edu/83099989/The_Observant_Owl_or_Hutum_Panchar_Naksha
12. Sen, Ranjit, 'Birth of a Colonial City: Calcutta', New York: Routledge, 2019, p. 57
13. Sen, Sukumar, 'History of Bengali Literature', New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1960, pp. 231–232
14. Singha, Kaliprasanna, 'Hutom Pyanchar Naksha', Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, B.S 1355
15. Singha, Kaliprasanna, 'The Observant Owl: Hutom's Vignettes of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta', 2nd ed., translated by Swarup Roy, with a foreword by Partha Chatterjee and an essay by Ranajit Guha, New Delhi: Primus Books, 2024
16. Sinha, Pradip, 'Calcutta in Urban History', Calcutta: Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd., 1978, pp. 126–132
17. Sur, Rajat Kanti, "A Forgotten Street Culture", n.d, Link: https://www.academia.edu/36334057/A_Forgotten_Street_Culture

About the author: Shamik Basu, M.A., Department of History, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.